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*for James McDonald  
in favor of Blackwell's I.  
and the Middlesex plan*

**DOCUMENT No. 37.**

BOARD OF

**ASSISTANT ALDERMEN.**

OCTOBER 13, 1835.

Communication from Dr. McDonald, relative to the Lunatic Asylum. Presented by Mr. Clark.

Laid on the table and ordered to be printed.

WM. HAGADORN, *Clerk.*

*To Aaron Clark Esq. of the Committee on Blackwell's Island &c.*

SIR, Having been applied to about two years ago by a Committee of the Common Council in relation to the construction of an asylum for the Insane on Blackwell's Island, I recommended the adoption of a plan to consist of several distinct buildings. This plan not having received the ap-

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*New York City Lun. Asyl.*

probation of that or of the subsequent Common Council, I advised a committee of the Corporation during the winter of 1834-5 to take the Middlesex Asylum for their model; attended the meetings of this Committee; and was consulted as to the internal arrangements and distribution of the various parts of the projected building. I have observed from the published proceedings of the Common Council that you have taken an interest in this subject and therefore address to you the following remarks, upon the late Report of the Commissioners of the Alms House. If they are of any value, you will please use them, as you may think proper.

Yours truly,

JAMES MACDONALD.

*Bloomingdale,* }  
*October 6th 1835.* }

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It is now several years since the attention of the Common Council was directed to the improvement of the Lunatic Department of the Bellevue establishment. In the Autumn of 1833, Committees were appointed by both Boards to examine into and report on the subject.

These Committees furnished themselves with various plans, and selected that of the Asylum at Limerick for their model. The result was, a modification of it was presented to the Board, which may not unjustly be denominated the Limerick plan deformed. Its imperfections, were so evident to the new Corporation of 1834, that they declined its adoption. It is but justice however to add, that in not following the plan adopted by their predecessors, they were governed by no other feelings than those of philanthropy. Party feeling had nothing to do with it. The most decided oppo-

ment of the modified Limerick plan was a partizan of those out of power. As no money had yet been expended to carry it into effect, the Commissioners and Common Council did not hesitate to investigate the subject for themselves. Committees were appointed by both branches, these Committees gave the matter a thorough and deliberate examination, and were provided with plans which the former Committees had not seen. Among others was that for Middlesex which in a modified form was subsequently adopted.

The Middlesex asylum belonging to the great British metropolis, it must be supposed, was planned, under more favorable circumstances than any similar building ever before erected. It was founded under the direction of a numerous and enlightened magistracy with ample funds, with the most distinguished architects in their employ, and above all with the advantage of consulting the plans of all Asylums then built, and among others that of Limerick. It is now but three years since the building was completed. Under these circumstances the Committee deemed the Middlesex Asylum worthy of attention. Upon examination into its actual merits entirely independent of the authority of a name, they were convinced that it possessed advantages superior to all they had hitherto seen. It was accordingly made the ground work for the Asylum on Blackwell's island, but not without great deliberation. More time and labor were probably bestowed upon the subject than any future Committees can be expected to devote to it. So important was it deemed by the Committee, that every part of the plan from the spacious galleries to the straw rooms and water closets should be fully developed by the architect, that the corner stone of the Edifice was not laid until the 30th day of April, but two weeks before the Corporation of 1834, went out of power. The foundation had advanced rapidly, and nearly \$3000 were expended, when the public was astounded by the intelligence that the work had been sud-



denly stopped without any evident cause. After three or four months the Commissioners at length presented to the Board of Assistant Aldermen a report containing their reasons for the suspension.

The first of these is, "that the site selected on which the building is to be erected consists of an immense quarry of stone," which when worked will yield \$68,000 &c.&c. I will not stop to enquire into the accuracy of this estimate, but I cannot forbear expressing my surprise, that public men in erecting a building of such immense and lasting importance should be governed by such narrow views of economy. The spot selected is the most eligible, if not the only suitable one for the Asylum. An Asylum for the insane requires the most complete drainage. Thorough draining cannot be affected without a considerable decent, and it is believed that the fall is not sufficient in any other part of the island. Besides, the views from the airing courts for the patients on a clear level would necessarily be limited; while with that degree of slope which the ground chosen admits of, this will be as extensive, beautiful and diversified as can be desired. What are a few thousand dollars in comparison with such a location for an institution that is to endure for ages?

The second objection to the present location is, that when the northern extremity of the island shall be filled in, and regulated there will be sixteen acres of land above the building which will then "become comparatively valueless." This same land the Commissioners believe may be sold when properly raised &c. for two thousand dollars per acre.

The "Commissioners" profess "to be most deeply impressed with the importance and necessity of making all necessary provisions to promote the well being and comfort of those unfortunate persons committed to their charge whom it has pleased the Almighty in his providence to afflict with

loss of reason." Of this from the high respectability of the gentlemen who act as Commissioners, I entertain no doubt, but I would ask what is the "*necessary provision*" with the "importance and necessity" of which they "are most deeply impressed?" Does it limit the unfortunate inmates of the contemplated Asylum to a few hundred feet, or a few paltry acres of land? Let the Commissioners, enquire how many acres of land are attached to the best regulated Asylums, both at home and abroad, and they will find that sixteen acres form but a small space for the proper treatment of hundreds of Lunatics. If sixteen acres on the south side of the building be added their will not be an inch more of land belonging to it, than ought to be attached to such an institution, both for the purpose of horticulture and \*isolation. But say the Commissioners the ground may bring when "regulated" \$2000 per acre. This is surely not the sentiment of the people of "this great and proud city."

"Another reason which strengthened the Commissioners in their opinion is, that the unfortunates who are labouring under hallucination ought to be isolated, or removed as far as possible from all other public buildings on the island: and it is not unlikely that the future policy, or necessity of the Corporation, may induce them to erect buildings for public purposes, nearer to this location than is at present anticipated."

I hold that the *isolation* of the insane is a cardinal point in their treatment. I will therefore ask the Commissioners, which will effect the object most completely, to set apart sixteen acres on each side of the building or to crowd the Asylum upon the northern point of the island? As to the future policy or necessities of the Corporation, I maintain that the ground for the insane should be held sacred, that no "policy" should be allowed to interfere with it, and

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\* By this word "*isolation*" which has not yet come into general use, I mean the separation of patients into distinct classes, and the seclusion of them from the various causes of excitement, to which entire liberty exposes them.

that the Corporation have it in their power to place themselves above the supposed necessities.

Finally, the Commissioners urge the selection of "this particular spot" on the Northern point of the Island on account of the beauty of the surrounding scenery. Is it necessary to ask them how much these beauties will be enhanced by a location a few hundred feet farther South upon elevated ground?

We now come to the most important part of the Report of the Commissioners; their "suggestion in relation to the *plan* of the contemplated Asylum." They are of opinion that it is defective in many important points. In the first place, three parts of the building are three stories in height, viz: the centre and two octagon buildings "which is deemed by the most experienced Physicians and others, to be highly improper." I fully partake in this opinion when fairly stated, which is, that those parts of an Asylum intended for the residence and lodgings of the Insane, should not be more than two stories in height. In the present instance, the third story of the centre building is intended not for the patients, but for the Officers of the establishment. As to the upper stories of the two octagons, the writer is not certain to what purposes they have been appropriated, but is under the impression that they are to be used for reservoirs of water, and other objects connected with the general economy of the house. At any rate, such was their original design, and such may be their ultimate destination. But if upon further examination it be not found proper to assign them to these purposes, there can be no objection to making them infirmaries for the sick, or working rooms, or occasional day rooms.

Thus it is shown, that no part of the building intended for the residence of Insane patients is more than two stories high, and that the objection to the building on that ground is entirely without foundation.



Another objection urged by the Commissioners against the plan adopted, is, "its having rooms or dormitories almost throughout the whole extent on each side of the Corridors;" thereby preventing both ventilation and the entrance of sufficient light. From this observation, the Commissioners seem to have overlooked the very ample provision made for both these purposes. In the first place each room is to have an opening in the outside wall near the ceiling through which the foul air will pass, and escape by means of a flue at the top of the building. In the second place, each room will be lighted and aired by a sufficiently large window.—Thirdly, over each door opening on the corridor will be placed an iron sash without glass. With all these provisions it will be impossible to prevent a free circulation of air, and the admission of a sufficiency of light. "In this manner are the galleries of the Bloomingdale Asylum arranged, and they have been always remarkable for their cheerfulness and the purity of their air." The objection above stated would be a serious one, if light and air were to be admitted only at the extremity of the gallery; but as there is to be a window of two or three feet square over each door, and these but seven feet apart, it is entirely groundless. Besides, there is not to be an uninterrupted continuity of rooms throughout the whole extent of the corridor; more than one-third of one side is to be without sleeping rooms, thereby affording an additional entrance of air and light.

"In cold and stormy weather it is necessary to close the sleeping apartments of a Lunatic Asylum during the day, which must render the halls that have dormitories on each side as in the present plan, dark and gloomy; these halls being the only places for recreation, on such occasions must abridge the pleasures of the inmates in their diversions and exercises." Before reading this passage, I had believed that there were to be such places belonging to the establishment as day-rooms, work-rooms, and work-shops; and that the minds of the unfortunate inmates were to be diverted

by various employments suited to their tastes and habits, while at the same time their physical health was to be improved, and the pecuniary interests of the Institution advanced. Such was certainly the understanding when the plan was adopted, and the most ample provisions were made for "recreation" and change of scene. Large day rooms and work rooms, besides cheerful corridors and extensive airing courts, were allotted to each class of patients. Where is the necessity then for making "these halls the only places for recreation on such occasions?"

As a citizen of New-York, I feel an interest in her public institutions, and hope that while others are improving the condition of the Insane, we shall neither stand still nor retrograde.

In the best conducted Pauper Asylums of Europe, manual labor is now the most important means of cure. By the Report of the Middlesex Asylum for the last year, it appears this has been most extensively and successfully practiced, and is worthy of imitation in New-York. The following is an extract from the Report then made by Doctor Ellis:—"In this Institution during the present year, occupation has been carried to a much greater extent than at any former period, the average number employed being 320. No additional servants have been engaged in the domestic parts of the establishment notwithstanding the increased number of patients. There is still but one cook, one laundry-maid, and one saee person, in short, at the head of evnry department the work being done by the patients under *their* direction.

"In former years, considerable difficulty has been experienced in finding occupation for them in the winter months, particularly as the inhabitants of this part of the country are generally unaccustomed to any in-door manufacturing employments. This in a great measure has been overcome, by having procured persons to teach them the spin-



ning of twine, making pottle-baskets for fruit ; picking, carding, and spinning wool for the making of mops, together with the manufacturing of straw hats and bonnets. This is done not only for the use of the whole 570 patients, but a quantity of them have been sold. Six persons have also been taught to make shoes within the year, who before, were totally ignorant of that business. The active bustle excited by these means has produced the most salutary effects, and many of the patients who before it took place were obliged to be confined to keep them from mischief, and from destroying their clothes, are now daily amusing themselves in some of these varied avocations as their fancy dictates. In fact, a very large proportion of the patients, with the exception of the imbecile and fatuous are now stimulated to make an attempt to employ themselves usefully from merely imitating the others ; and of however little value their work may be, the attempting to do something useful, gives them a little feeling of self importance, and in some measure seems to connect them with Society."

The Commissioners further state, "that the plan under consideration has fallen into disrepute" in Europe, and that the building erected at Limerick, in Ireland, in 1826, the general features of which were adopted by the Corporation in 1833-4 with some modification is preferred as possessing in a greater degree than any other the requisites for a Lunatic Asylum.

I would ask the Commissioners what authority they have for stating that the Middlesex plan has fallen into disrepute ? The authority of Mr. Haviland is worth as much as the authority of any other distinguished architect, but I do not admit that the authority of any architect is sufficient to decide a question beyond the sphere of his professional studies. It is the province of the physician who has the management of the insane to give a general outline of the plan—it belongs to the Architect to arrange, compose, and finish the design—to give it "architectural fitness," but not

to sacrifice utility to classic taste. The Wakefield, Perth, and Middlesex Asylums, which are constructed on the same general plan, are distinguished above all others for two of the first requisites in a Lunatic Asylum—classification and facility of supervision. Guided by these principles, the clearest heads, and most experienced professional men conceived, digested, arranged, and carried the plan into effect. It was not a work of improvisation, but of deliberate and patient thought. The same plan has been again and again copied in England and Scotland, and a draft of it has recently been made for a new Institution in Switzerland. After the statement of these facts, nothing more is necessary to show the estimation of this plan in Europe. The Limerick, though decidedly inferior to the Middlesex plan in “classification, supervision and recreation” is in Ireland a pretty good building for the purposes to which it is devoted; but in New-York its wings have grown so enormously while the main body retains its original Hibernian proportions, that it has not “architectural fitness,” and is not applicable to the object for which it was designed. Thus there are to be no less than forty dormitories to a single dry room, and this room but ten feet wide by forty-six feet in length; while in the Limerick Asylum there are but thirteen dormitories to a day-room, twenty-six by sixteen feet. The day-room even here is deficient in size, but it is large when compared with the New-York Limerick plan; having four hundred and sixteen square feet for thirteen patients, when this is to have but four hundred and sixty, for forty patients.

It is difficult to conceive any form for a day-room more inconvenient than this, but it is easy to imagine what an atmosphere forty persons would create in a room of such dimensions, and how soon when brought so closely together they would disagree. There should be at least two day-rooms for this number of patients. The number and spaciousness of the day and work rooms constitute one of the great advantages of the Middlesex plan. Besides, there is

such an entire destitution of work-rooms, infirmary-rooms, reception-rooms, visiting-rooms, &c. &c. in the Limerick plan, that it seems useless to make any more remarks about it. Further, the writer is not aware that the plan has been copied on the Continent : Where then is the evidence of its superiority ?

It is to be hoped that the Corporation will give this matter a deliberate and impartial investigation. The City of New-York requires an Asylum that shall be inferior to none. A Lunatic Asylum is an Institution whose bounties will not be sought by the unworthy, and the public expects that more ample provision will be made for the insane, than for any other class of Paupers.

JAMES MACDONALD.



such an entire destination of work-rooms, infirmity-rooms, race-rooms, visiting-rooms, &c. &c. in the Lincoln plan, that it seems needless to observe any more words about it. Further, the writer is not aware that the plan has been copied on the Continent: Where then is the evidence of its superiority?

It is to be hoped that the Corporation will give this matter a deliberate and impartial investigation. The City of New-York requires an Asylum that shall be inferior to none. A Pauperic Asylum is no institution whose inmates will not be sought by the authorities, and the public expects that more ample provision will be made for the insane, than for any other class of sufferers.

JAMES MACDONALD.